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Five Steps to a Winning Project Team

Creating strategic groups to increase efficiency, decrease costs.

As healthcare executives work to increase efficiency and decrease costs in a dynamic healthcare environment, they often undertake projects such as technology implementation, operational and process improvements and facility planning. These projects typically require the formation of collaborative teams comprising hospital leadership and staff as well as project managers and support staff from vendors and outside consulting firms. Executives must be prepared to establish efficient project teams that focus on communication and collaboration to achieve success.

The strategic alignment of organizations and individuals with differing expertise and backgrounds can be both beneficial and challenging. Despite potential barriers, project success can be attained using five simple steps.

Step One: Build the Right Team

The best project teams include stakeholders at all levels, from executives to those individuals at the front line. These individuals have the inside knowledge that will be critical to the success of technical experts from external organizations. Including front-line staff allows managers to remain involved in the project, while

the true end users, either clinical or nonclinical, contribute directly to the project's success, including improved healthcare operations and outcomes. Front-line champions also may assist in training other staff during project implementation.

By matching each team member's incentive to the overall goals, the entire team is further motivated to achieve success.

A corporate lead is imperative for project success. In addition to high-level managerial duties, individuals at the executive level are sources of morale and motivation. Success is more easily achieved when executives lead by example and promote the changes and behaviors expected from staff.

In addition, identifying an individual within the organization to serve as the project manager and single point of contact throughout the project is important. This individual is the liaison through which all communications pass, thus maintaining a communication structure. The project manager remains

involved throughout the duration of the project and is ultimately accountable for all project details and deliverables.

Step Two: Facilitate Communication

Timely, accurate, useful and credible communication is critical to maintaining a cohesive team environment and achieving project success. Strategies, goals and project information should be communicated consistently throughout each stage of the process so all team members remain equally informed. To maintain quality communication, a collaborative project team must develop and cultivate group norms that encourage open sharing of information. A no surprises attitude must be adopted to foster a trusting work environment, which contributes to project success.

Busy schedules and multiple projects may challenge efforts for frequent communication. To ensure timely information delivery, be proactive about approaching potential obstacles. The team leader should schedule recurrent face-to-face meetings to encourage ongoing discussion and ensure that deliverables are completed within project time frames. When face-to-face meetings are not possible, confer-

ence calls should be used. In addition, the Internet allows project leads to communicate project status and successes to stakeholders. Blogs and other Web postings on facility Web sites make information sharing easy and convenient.

Step Three: Encourage Collaboration

To achieve success, project team leaders must emphasize the importance of collaborative planning and goal setting. Groups that plan together are typically more successful, particularly because project plans, deliverables and goals are explicitly stated, and all expectations are communicated and understood. A collaborative team structure fosters a learning environment where experts can share knowledge and experiences. Individual input and participation furthers each party's interests in and commitment to the project.

Collaborative goal setting allows team members to achieve individual successes, while still contributing to the overarching project goals. A vendor, for instance, may focus on increased sales, while a facility focuses on overall cost reduction in a particular area. Collaborative project teams should develop a plan that motivates all entities to achieve success. In this example, the vendor might reward the organization for its increased purchases with a volume-based price reduction. If consultants are involved, they could be rewarded through an enhanced project management fee associated with increasing levels of success. By matching each team member's incentive to the overall goals, the

entire team is further motivated to achieve success.

Step Four: Recognize and Overcome Barriers

There are a number of potential barriers that arise when working in a team environment. However, the healthcare environment is especially challenging due to its unique makeup. Project leads may be challenged to facilitate relationships among people of very different backgrounds but who share the common goal of providing patient services. The relationships between clinical and nonclinical staff and management may be challenging to manage, even under the most optimal circumstances. Departments often are accustomed to working in silos; however, success only can be achieved if these units work together. This is particularly important across clinical and nonclinical departments. Nursing, for example, must work with finance and materials management to ensure successful acquisition and implementation of a new piece of equipment. Opening lines of communication across departments is a key step to overcoming the challenge presented by separated departments.

Project team leaders must also anticipate barriers that may exist within the scope of a project, due, in part, to the mixed nature of a project team. Potential challenges might include:

- Goals and deliverables not being met
- Lack of time management and follow-up
- Clashing personalities

- Disagreements between experts—clinical versus technical
- Political challenges

Despite the variables that might contribute to project challenges, by communicating team goals and expectations openly and effectively, these barriers can be overcome.

Step Five: Celebrate Your Successes

Completion of a project and the steps along the way can be intrinsically rewarding for project team members. Outwardly celebrating successes also can be a source of motivation for the team. When project milestones are reached, they should be communicated to project team members and stakeholders. Small rewards for team members who go above and beyond their duties also should be considered to communicate a job well done. These rewards can come in various forms, from certificates of appreciation to recognition in the organization's staff newsletter or on its Web site.

Though challenges are inevitable throughout the course of any project, barriers often can be avoided and always can be managed. With effective leadership and the right team members, your organization is well on its way to project success. ▲

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